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► To cite this version:

Claire Bidart, Arnaud Dupray. Narratives and Traces: “ Trans-” Quantitative and Qualitative Methods for Bridging the Gap between Objective and Subjective Data. *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique / Bulletin of Sociological Methodology*, 2015, Temporalités et trajectoires à l’articulation du quantitatif et du qualitatif (n°124 et 125), 125, pp.5-7. 10.1177/0759106314555654 . halshs-01306804

HAL Id: halshs-01306804

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01306804>

Submitted on 26 Apr 2016

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Narratives and Traces

« Trans-» Quantitative and Qualitative Methods for Bridging the Gap between Objective and Subjective Data

by

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Résumé

Dans cette brève introduction nous rappelons les objectifs de ce double numéro : explorer de nouvelles voies dans la combinaison des méthodes qualitatives et quantitatives. La dimension temporelle et l'articulation des échelles sont présentes également dans l'ensemble de ces travaux. Ici la focale est portée plus précisément sur les articulations entre données objectives et subjectives.

Abstract

In this short introduction, we briefly recall the aims of this double issue : exploring new paths in combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The temporal dimension and the combination of frameworks are also present in all these papers. Here the focus is more precisely put on the articulations between objective and subjective data.

Mots clefs

Méthodes mixtes, Analyses quantitatives, Analyses qualitatives, Innovation méthodologique, Processus temporels, Parcours de vie

Keywords

Mixed Methods, Quantitative Analysis, Qualitative Analysis, Methodological Innovation, Temporal Processes, Life Courses

Debates between qualitative and quantitative methods have too often created the illusion they covered a division between objective data and subjective data. But one cannot forget that

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“objective” data come from human beings who kindly answered to questionnaires, and that responses were given through the double filter of their representations (when selecting a response) and of those of the researchers (when designing the survey, and analyzing and interpreting the results). One also underestimates that traces left by individual paths, as crystallized and institutionalized as they can be, are the results of complex social processes of choice, diffusion, validation, labelling and temporal configurations (Grossetti, 2003).

This issue of the *BMS* is in continuation with and following the aims of the number 124 issue. Let us recall that they are to provide exploratory paths between qualitative and quantitative methods. Issue number 124 presented three papers from the same research project (BIPAJE, ANR-09-BLAN-0301-01) focused on bifurcations during youth life courses. Those papers crossed and combined methods applied to materials that are not a priori suited for them. Quantitative analyzes were made of life stories and qualitative analyzes were carried out on questionnaires. But in all those contributions, qualitative and quantitative methods were closely articulated (in relation to each other) together, processing differently the same initial materials and displaying how they can fit together in innovative approaches.

The three papers presented in this issue number 125 continue with this approach and with another common point which is the importance of the temporal dimension. The phenomena analyzed here are processes which are treated as such. This implies that sequences of events, regimes or phases are used to capture reality and help in its interpretation; the authors tell us stories that involved different elements over time. This also means taking into account the fact that social time is not linear; it includes moments of different intensity with events, turning points, changes in activity regimes and various processes of emergence (Abbott, 2001; White, 2008). Each of the three articles presented here tells such stories, each one in its own framework: biographical, organizational, or, even more broadly, at the level of a scientific field. But in each of these articles, these frameworks are also articulated between themselves: the broad historical events and the succession of generations are involved in the qualification of the different sequences of a life course; a change in activity regime, during a process of business creation, crosses individual paths with markets. Finally, the global circulation of an invention results from occasional meetings of certain persons, from the institutional location of pioneering work, and from irregular processes of diffusion in geographical space.

These three papers contribute largely to the discussion of the dividing line between subjective data and objective data. They criticize the illusion of objectivity conveyed by standardized records and show the importance of recognizing their subjective component and, moreover, the importance of highlighting it. In doing so, they build innovative links between narratives and traces, between accounts and calendars of events, between life stories and status changes, and between careers and publications.

In their article, Eva Lelièvre and Nicolas Robette attempt to collect the individual perceptions of well-being through the qualification by respondents of their own life periods as hard times or good times. The authors thus elaborate a subjective narrative which, following its specific trajectory, complements the factual recording of events and sheds new light on the life course.

The article by Jean-François Barthe, Nathalie Chauvac and Michel Grossetti combines economic and organizational data with biographical accounts, in the analysis of the various activity regimes which follow each other in the process of business creation.

The article by Marion Maisonobe shows that the emergence of a scientific specialty (DNA repair) cannot be assessed only through the observation of bibliometrics, but is built through processes involving individual actors, institutions and complex regulations.

These three articles provide original intermediate tools for performing a temporal placement and sequencing of periods, regimes and milestones that punctuate the story under

study. This sequencing sometimes allows the construction of typologies combining objective and subjective dimensions. In doing so, these analyses manage to get closer to “real life” with events and experiences that drove the process in different frameworks (biographical, organizational, scientific). They also contribute to overcoming the singularities of individual experience and to drawing typical patterns and sequences. These can then be tested in other fields and possibly generalized.

Finally, this double issue of the *BMS* allows experimentations with new avenues of research concerning the interactions of qualitative and quantitative methods. These original papers lead to more flexible boundaries between these methods. Their attention to the temporal dimension, to the sequencing and identification of key points and bifurcations, which is also another of their common characteristics, will hopefully renew studies of life course, organizational pathways and careers.

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